

# **‘Spiritual boot camp’ deepens men’s faith ahead of Easter**

When a group of parishioners approached Father J. Collin Poston and asked him to lead them in Exodus 90, he quickly agreed.

The pastor of St. Anthony Shrine in Emmitsburg and Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Thurmont later wondered what he had gotten himself into, as he likens the regimen that demands asceticism and rigorous prayer to a “spiritual bootcamp.”

“Now, I just have a lot of joy in it and God is blessing it,” he said. “I’m really glad I’m doing it; I’m finding it to be very fruitful.”

Exodus 90 centers on men achieving “spiritual freedom” from what its founders described as “societal enslavement.” It helps men seeking to grow in their vocations of priesthood or marriage, and for men struggling with an addiction.

“It is designed to help a man grow in a deeper relationship with Christ,” Father Poston said.

The program takes its name from the Book of Exodus, which follows the Jews in their freedom from slavery. Its readings accentuate the men’s journey as embark on Exodus 90’s four pillars: 90 days, prayer, asceticism and fraternity.

Rehabilitation experts and scientists agree that 90 days is generally the timeframe necessary to break or form a habit. Many groups, including Father Poston’s, started the program Jan. 21, which means it will conclude Easter Sunday.

“You can do Exodus 90 at any time, but I think it’s great to do it when it ends at Easter,” Father Poston said, likening it to an extended Lent.

Asceticism might be Exodus 90’s most attention-grabbing element. Cold showers; no alcohol, soda or sweetened drinks; no desserts, sweets or snacking between meals; no television or movies; abstinence from social media; regular and intense exercise; seven hours of sleep each night; and no major material purchases are among the

practices.

Father Poston's group is led by Ryan Budd, a seminarian studying for the Diocese of Hartford, Conn., in his second theology year at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg. Exodus 90 was founded there, by Father Brian Doerr, now serving in the Diocese of Lafayette, Ind., and a group of seminarians.

"The discipline is really about freedom," Budd said, adding that Lent is a time where trust in Christ should be reestablished. "It's to force us to surrender to Christ.

"We're all enslaved at various level to all sorts of vices and desires. We don't realize how enslaved we are, especially until we try to be free."

The Emmitsburg-Thurmont group includes 10 men, seven of whom are married.

"As someone who will be guiding souls, it's important especially to know and be able to guide fathers of families," said Budd, whose knowledge of the challenges facing fathers today has grown.

Father Michael DeAscanis leads a group of married men at his parish, St. Philip Neri in Linthicum Heights.

"They want to be better husbands and fathers," Father DeAscanis said. "(Exodus 90) helps Catholic laymen live their faith intensely."

The fraternity includes at least weekly meetings. Father DeAscanis also offers weekly Mass and confession for the participants.

Asceticism, he said, particularly forgoing social media and television, can be especially helpful.

"It creates more quiet in your mind," Father DeAscanis noted. "You can't hear God when you're plugged in."

Father Poston said he struggles with giving up those "creature comforts" - including grabbing his phone during a free moment to scroll through social media - but by week two realized he was not missing it as much as he anticipated. He's using free time to pray, call up an old friend or take Otto, his Pomeranian, for a walk.

For married men, Father DeAscanis noted, Exodus 90 can be a good time for a man to reconnect with his wife, children or God.

“It is a challenge, and men like challenges,” Father DeAscanis said. “It encourages healthy and holy living ... Healthy and holy makes us happy.”